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ABSTRACT

Assessment and decision making are core phases of the career counseling process. In the assessment phase, and understanding of vocational self-concept develops through an integration of one's values, skills, abilities, interests, needs, personality, style, and other factors. Career counselors have used a variety of standardized, quantitative instruments to obtain this information and, increasingly, are developing and using non-standardized and qualitative methods of assessment. Decision-making has also been facilitated through a range of qualitative and quantitative processes. This paper highlights the use of creative arts in the career assessment process to help clients discover their passions and find their paths. (GCP)

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Using Creative Arts in the Career Assessment Process

by
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Chapter Seven

Using Creative Arts in the Career Assessment Process

Carlotta J. Willis

Introduction

Assessment and decision making are core phases of the career counseling process. In the assessment phase, an understanding of vocational self-concept develops through an integration of one's values, skills, abilities, interests, needs, personality, style, and other factors. Career counselors have used a variety of standardized, quantitative instruments to obtain this information and, increasingly, are developing and using non-standardized and qualitative methods of assessment (Zunker, 2003). Decision-making has also been facilitated through a range of qualitative and quantitative processes.

Qualitative Career Assessment and Decision Making

Qualitative methods have been recommended (Goldman, 1992; McMahon, Patton, & Watson, 2003), in part, because there is less separation from the counseling process, and because the tendency to reify results is more limited (Bolles & Figler, 1999) than when using standardized, quantitative assessment tools. Other advantages of qualitative assessment methods include individual and multicultural adaptability, the active role of the client, and the integrative nature of the process and results (Goldman, 1992). McMahon, et. al. (2003) also suggest that the qualitative approach is more congruent with the constructivist process of co-creation of meaning within a collaborative counselor client relationship, in which "stories rather than scores" (p.196) are constructed. Ultimately, it is the client's clarity of self-concept, rather than the counselor's professional impression, which is core to the successful career outcome. Familiar qualitative career assessments include card sorts, line lines, story writing, and career games.

Krieshok (1998) suggests that decision makers often cannot reconstruct the logic or sequence of their decision, since often decisions are actually made unconsciously, and implies that "decisions made and implemented

at the unconscious level are often more satisfying than decisions made when the conscious processor steps in" (p. 218). Therefore, Krieshok recommends helping clients to open to their intuitive, unconscious knowledge by "working to identify consistent themes by engaging in such exercises as guided imagery, journaling, and telling and writing stories about the self and accomplishments of the past" (p. 219). Many career counselors are familiar with some qualitative decision-making techniques, such as the Six Hats exercise, or even a simple coin toss—exercises which access the intuitive (Figler, 1999).

Creative Arts Therapy

Creative arts therapists, by virtue of their philosophy and method of practice, have developed a variety of creative arts techniques for use in the psychotherapeutic process, and for both quantitative and qualitative assessment (Feder and Feder, 1998). Art therapists employ standardized projective instruments, such as the familiar House-Tree-Person Technique. Dance-movement therapists are trained in detailed methodologies for analysis of body movements, primarily used in research and assessment (Feder & Feder, 1998). Most creative arts therapists, however, use the artistic process, rather than standardized assessments, to help the client develop her own understandings and insights, and limit counselor interpretation, which might serve to inhibit the client's process. The emphasis of the therapy is on client insight and meaning-making.

Creative arts therapists are master's level professionals, certified by their respective professional organizations (often licensed as mental health counselors), who have attended specialized training programs in their discipline. The depth and skill at which they utilize the arts in the psychotherapeutic process is beyond what can be gained through the application of a sampling of arts techniques. This paper is intended only to expand the resources of the career counselor, not to replicate the dimensions of practice of the fully trained creative arts therapist.

Creative Arts in Career Counseling

The use of creative arts techniques in career counseling has been somewhat limited. Pope & Minor (2000) have encouraged experiential activity in the career counseling process, however their source book contains few descriptions of activities using the arts (Willis, 2000). Use of the creative arts can be particularly beneficial for clients who are artistically inclined, those who reject standardized tests, clients having difficulty deciding between options at any point in the counseling process, and even those who are less able to access their intuitive side. The creative

arts therapy process can evoke emotion, promote relaxation, and help the client access an unconscious level for decision-making.

Guidelines for Use of Creative Arts in Career Assessment

Creative career counselors can develop their own arts approaches to assessment and decision-making. The same guidelines would apply as in the use of more traditional assessments and interventions. It goes without saying that the assessments take place within the context of a solid working alliance between counselor and client.

- Know the purpose of the assessment: who is the client, what is the question(s)? The arts assessment is suggested in response to the development of questions within the counseling process and for the individual style and needs of the client. The arts process may not be useful for all clients or for all career issues, as with any of the more traditional career assessments.
- Design or select an activity to specifically address the needs and style of the client. People vary in their preference for visual, kinesthetic, linguistic, or auditory modes of processing and communication. Use your clients' strengths to their advantage.
- Combine the arts assessment with other assessments and interventions to assist the client in obtaining a full picture. These methods are not meant to stand alone, and should be used in conjunction with the best practices of career counseling.
- Process the experience thoroughly in order to increase understanding and to explore any possible meanings which may have been hidden to the client. Use the assessment to stimulate discussion, not to foreclose decisions or options.
- Assist the client in understanding what the "results" may mean. Explain the individualized nature of the arts process, that it is non-standardized, has not been assessed for validity, and does not predict future success. The meaning and value of the arts assessment is what the client constructs within the context of the counseling and in application to career life development.

Suggested Arts Applications

The following are some creative arts activities developed by the author and her students at Antioch New England Graduate School for use during the assessment and decision-making phases of career counseling.

Visual Arts

- Career Sand Tray: The sand tray is both a Jungian therapy approach and a technique for use with children in therapy. The counselor

provides a shallow tray of sand, and a collection of figures and objects to be placed in the sand. The client may also bring objects of personal significance. The client can enact a scenario, create an image, or tell a story using the figures and objects. In the career process, the client might create a tray representing vocational self- concept, career obstacles, or career genogram. One client, for example, used a tiger and a lamb to portray his assertive side used in his work as an advertising executive and his more tender side displayed at home. Clients have also used figures to enact how their personality type manifests in different situations.

- Career Self-Concept Representation: For this exercise, the client creates an art object which represents her self-concept. Examples of these are a self-concept mandala, a poster of opportunities and vision, or a symbolic icon representing career mission. Clients have created magic boxes with wishes and dreams, houses with obstacles represented by roofs, career flags, collages, miniature gardens, and career medicine wheels. A student from Japan created origami front (ready for use) and back (available when needed) pockets to hold work related aspects, also represented through origami.
- Expressive Drawing: A variety of arts assessments may be created using a combination of visualization, guided imagery and drawing, painting, or expression with pastels. Most do not try to realistically create images (unless the client is a visual artist), but rather use the medium to create an abstract expression of the sense of the experience or concept. Subjects might include a future workplace environment, career dreams, obstacles, career paths, or whatever issues seem most salient for the client. One client's drawing, a path through a dark, dense forest to the open, rolling sea, led her to understand that the career encouraged by her father was too confining a choice for her at this point in her life.

Dance and Movement

The movement approach is, of course, easiest to introduce to clients who are dancers or enjoy dancing. Given the right context, however, others may be encouraged to access the kinesthetic knowledge provided through body movement, even if they remain seated throughout the process. In fact, it is often most revelatory with clients who generally are not accessing their bodily-felt emotions and understandings. The counselor allows the process holistically and kinesthetically to inform the client's self-assessment or decision-making by using reflective rather than declarative statements to facilitate client understanding during the verbal processing of the movement experience.

- Decision Gestures: One process for assisting career-decision making has been described previously (Willis, 2000). This involves having the client relax with eyes closed, then allowing one arm to move while envisioning one career choice (or intermediate decision) having been made. Then switch to the other arm moving while envisioning the other choice. The counselor witnesses the movement, gives feedback on what was observed, and listens to the client's experience of the difference between the two decisions. On occasion, the movements will lead to a desire to integrate the options, as it did for one client, who found a way to combine competitive mountain biking with counseling adolescents.
- Options and Aspects Dance: Another movement assessment involves directing the client to dance in a mode so as to represent different aspects of the self, or different possible career options, integrating the various options into one core dance. Discussion follows around which aspects felt most congruent, what the integration revealed, and other meanings discovered. This is similar to the Five Lives exercise (Zunker, 2003), with the added kinesthetic and emotional data provided through body movements.

Other Media

Art and dance activity, of course, might be combined and music may be integrated along with the process. Poetry and story writing might also be included, depending on which medium is most accessible for the client. Clients have written career songs or found particular pieces of music to facilitate discussion or provide inspiration.

Summary

Career counselors are encouraged to explore expressing their own career stories through the arts before moving this approach into their practice. Working with a creative arts therapist is a wonderful way for the career counselor to explore and deeply understand the power of these approaches. In combination with the more traditional approaches, and the solid interview skills of the competent counselor, the creative arts can be a wonderful addition to the counselor's tool box. It is hoped that this publication will encourage the sharing of this broadening of the options available for career counselors in their work to help clients discover their passions and find their paths.

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